Illicit dumper: 'Didn't bother me'

By Casey Bukro
Environment editor

How our buried wastes come back to haunt us. In Perspective.

SAM IS A MIDNIGHT dumper, a member of that ruthless clan of poison merchants who accept dangerous wastes for a price and dump them when nobody's looking.

"I don't know anything about chemicals and could care less," says Sam, a muscular man with sandy hair and the look of a hawk. "All I did was drive a truck and make a living. It didn't bother me."

With that total disregard for human safety, untold millions of gallons of hazardous wastes are dumped by the chemical scavengers of America—along deserted country roads; in woods and fields; in vacant lots overgrown with weeds; down a sewer.

A MIDNIGHT DUMPER might even drive past your home on a rainy night with the valves of his tank truck open—flushing poisons into the gutters. Or he'll leave drums brimming with dangerous chemicals in abandoned buildings and then vanish.

Those are some tricks of the trade for men like Sam, who doesn't want his real name published because he might be arrested. And there's something else that worries him.

"I was one of the drivers who worked for U.S. Scrap," he says, his eyes shifting like a cornered animal's. "I was one of the guys who dumped a lot of stuff at several locations."

U.S. Scrap Corp., near 120th Street and Cottage Grove Avenue, went bankrupt in 1976 after being sued for polluting the six-acre site with chemical poisons. It was a drum recycling operation. Only a week ago, an abandoned grain silo on the property was found to contain 13,000 gallons of flammable and poisonous chemicals left there by an unknown midnight dumper.

THE SITE AND its former operator, Steve Martell, are under investigation by state and federal authorities, who ordered a search of the Calumet Harbor area for other vacant buildings being used as clandestine dumps.

Sam could tell them a lot about how the renegade waste haulers work, how they threaten thousands of Americans with death, disease, and danger by dumping their lethal cargos in unsafe places.

This profile of a midnight dumper emerged slowly, during a two-hour interview with Sam as he puffed cigarets and sipped from a can of beer. It shows how he thinks, what makes him tick, and how he eludes detection.

WHILE A DRIVER for U.S. Scrap in the mid-1970s, Sam says he picked up barrels of wastes or drove a 5,000-gallon tank truck full of liquid wastes—making two to five trips a day.

"We were going all over the area picking up loads from Joliet to this side of Waukegan, all kinds of stuff," he says. The customers included tanneries, metal and ink manufacturers, chemical plants, and food processors.

While driving the tank truck, says Sam, "we'd hook up the hoses, throw them into a pool, and suck it all out. We'd get 1,500 to 3,500 gallons at a time."

Back at U.S. Scrap, he says, "I just came in off Cottage Grove and blew off a load" by reversing the suction pumps on the truck and flushing the wastes. When the ground at U.S. Scrap got too soggy, miring trucks in the chemical quagmire, Sam would prowl the backroads of the industrial no-man's land of the Calumet Harbor region.

"At night, you turn off your lights, dump your load, and get out. That was basically it." To prove his point, Sam showed The Tribune where he once dumped wastes at the U.S. Scrap site.

THERE'S A 20-foot mound of earth there now, which Sam says is new to him.

"That mound wasn't there before. But that's where we would dump barrels, cover them with dirt, and run over them with a bulldozer and break them so the stuff would seep into the ground."

At another place, Sam sees fresh signs of dumping.

"This isn't too old," he remarks. "I recognize some of the chemicals by the smell and what it looks like." Elsewhere, he shows where barrels were unloaded and their contents spilled on the ground. The drums were then cleaned, painted, and sold as garbage cans.

SAM WAS ONE of seven drivers at U.S. Scrap, he said, adding that the kind of dumping he did was widespread in the Calumet Harbor area.

"Everybody did it that way," he insists. "I'd go east of the Calumet Expressway, and we'd see other trucks doing the same thing. It didn't bother me. I figured they had licenses to do it. I was just a truck driver."

Sam said a radio dispatcher at U.S. Scrap would tell him where to pick up a load of wastes, and where to dump it. "I had to do it," he protests. "Whoever was handling the radio would tell us to dump it, and we'd dump it."

ONLY OCCASIONALLY would Sam have some misgivings, especially when he was directed to dump wastes in other Calumet Harbor locations.

"There was hanky-panky going on," he says. He named three other clandestine dumping spots, one near the Chicago-Indiana border, saying: "It had to leak into Lake Calumet. We'd go in there at night and the guy who let us in would dig a hole for us." Another spot was near Gary.

Sam offers a clue to finding illicit dumping lairs:

"You look for places that clean and sell metal drums, and that's where you find them. When you pick up a load of chemicals, you get to keep the 55-gallon drum. I didn't know what I was picking up half the time. Some of those chemicals could blow up. Acid was the worst stuff."

Once cleaned, these drums sell for $5 to $12 each as garbage cans, says Sam, so "there's got to be a lot of big money in it."

There's big money, too, in hauling chemical wastes away, no questions asked. By some estimates, it can cost from $20 to $155 to bury a drum of toxic material in an approved and safe dump, while the cost of illegal dumping could be only $1.50 a drum.

ORGANIZED CRIME, too, might be making inroads on the illegal waste traffic, as it has in other disposal operations. "There's talk of loan sharks," said Sam. "I know a couple of guys in that, and I don't want no part of that."

During his shadowy career in waste disposal, Sam once collided with a train and dropped a barrel on the Eisenhower Expressway. He complained of faulty brakes and lights on his trucks and was fired.

As the hazards of his old waste-running days become obvious, Sam admitted to having some second thoughts:

Tribune Photo by Val Mazzenga

Sam, a midnight dumper, visits one of the sites off the Calumet Expressway where he discharged dangerous wastes while he worked for U.S. Scrap: "At night, you turn off your lights, dump your load, and get out."

"Now people are getting hurt at Niagara Falls [Love Canal], and I don't like that. I didn't know any better. I thought it was legal. I didn't question it.

"I needed the job, but that's beside the point, knowing what I know now, what the danger is. With some of the chemicals, if a fire starts back there [U.S. Scrap], I don't know what they'd do to get it out."